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ABSTRACT

Societal acceptance of polarized discourse poses challenges for communication professors engaged in teaching ethical public speaking processes to undergraduates. This study explores how creating caring and safe environments for the discussion of difficult dialogues is paramount to creating civil and reasoned discourse that can address issues of moral conflict. It involved one civil public discourse course in which the goal is to instill a deeper understanding of the necessity of ethical public discourse, while engaging students in the process of crafting rhetorical presentations. Students follow certain procedures at the beginning and end of the course, and they must give four speeches as class assignments. Two broad research questions were posed to investigate whether students in this in-context speech course would learn the presentational skills that traditional public speaking courses address and whether students would discover the importance of civil public discourse in promoting reasoned and rational public deliberations. Pre- and post-tests revealed that students vacillate between dualistic and multiplistic thinking, moving from strongly held beliefs about what is right and wrong to basing their decision-making processes on authorities or intuitive feelings about the goodness-of-fit for any expressed position. Results suggest that students' understanding of civil public discourse does increase. Pre- and post-tests for another research question indicated that all students reported an increase in public speaking skills especially in their understanding of ethical public speaking. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Running head: A CARNEGIE SCHOLAR'S PROJECT

Personalizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:

A 2001-2002 Carnegie Scholars Project Report

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Personalizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:

A 2001-2002 Carnegie Scholars Project Report

Berman (1998) claims that "nurturing a democratic culture" is dependent on "the degree to which we care about and treat each other with respect and civility" (p. 27). Kerr (1996) asks how we "distinguish a community that holds its members in moral regard from one that does not?" I believe that the unprecedented polarization of public discourse has created a war-like atmosphere that inhibits civility in discussions and alienates people with differing values, attitudes, and beliefs from participating in public deliberations as do many other scholars (see for example, Barber, 1998; Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, & Stains, 1996; Tannen, 1998). The societal acceptance of polarized discourse pose challenges for communication professors engaged in teaching ethical public speaking processes to undergraduates and my first scholarship of teaching and learning project focuses on civil public discourse. My second scholarship of teaching and learning project this year grows out my concern that creating caring and safe environments for the discussion of difficult dialogues is paramount to creating civil and reasoned discourse that can address issues of moral conflict. Today, I will talk about both these projects to enhance your understanding and mine of what I am learning by investigating my own classroom for deep understanding.

My civil public discourse class was designed to foster significant and lasting forms of student engagement that clarifies the poverty of public discourse and the vexing disputes that alienate people from different American cultures. Overall, what I hope to accomplish in this course is to instill a deeper understanding of the necessity of ethical public discourse while engaging students in the process of crafting rhetorical

presentations. I began the term having students fill out a questionnaire that assessed their speaking skills, polar thinking, and awareness of civil public discourse. They introduced themselves to other classmates by sharing what they thought made a good conversation and how they personally approached discussions on controversial topics. Next, students wrote the first of twenty journal entries designed to help them connect the construct of civil public discourse with course assignments. In the first entry, students discussed in detail what they would do if Residence Life ask them to help plan an event addressing the issue of a "dry" campus. At the end of the course, students returned to these first essays and were invited to add, delete, or start their entry again based on their classroom experiences.

To begin the first of four speeches students will give in this class, they "adopt" a controversial topic they will use for three different presentations. Students gather 30 resources (articles, books, etc.) to construct the first two presentations that represent two different perspectives on their topic. The emphasis here is on multiple perspectives not polarized views. The goals of the assignment are to have students thoroughly understand one topic as a way to encourage them to articulate an informed viewpoint, confront their own assumptions, and to maintain an open mind as they encounter views different from their own stance. After the second presentation, students tell their classmates what beliefs they currently hold and explain how their position evolved over time. Class members fill out pre- and post- attitude surveys to help with constructs such as audience analysis and the influence potential of several persuasive speeches.

Next, students explore the validity and reliability of information obtained on the

Internet and discuss the possibility that arguments espoused personally and passionately often demonize the other side and promote conflict rather than promote reasoned discourse. Students select a provocative essay that supports one perspective on their "adopted" topic. They critique the arguments employed by the author of the essay and determine whether or not the essay increases the likelihood of civil public discourse. In the process, students assess the importance of civil, rather than polarizing, discourse.

The fourth speaking assignment addresses the students' expressed skepticism that a transcendent form of discourse could forge compromises or be a practical option that would allow conflicting parties to work with one another. I provide case studies for each student that point to instances where a public controversy was avoided through a series of consensus-building or public dialogue meetings. Students use Power Point presentations to explore the stories surrounding public dialogue based on examples where communities negotiated solutions to topics such as a HIV testing policy, land use regulations, or special needs housing placement. The learning objective is to have students recognize that agreements can be forged that satisfy a variety of people's interests and concerns without malice and by emphasizing civility and exploring common ground..

At the end of the semester, students fill out a post-test as part of the course evaluation process to indicate their rating of their current public speaking skills, their thoughts on polarized thinking, and their understanding of civil discourse. They also produce a personal critique paper that assesses the strengths and weaknesses of their public speaking abilities.

Two broad research questions were posed to investigate whether students in this in-context speech course would learn the presentational skills that traditional public

speaking courses address and whether students would discover the importance of civil public discourse in promoting reasoned and rationale public deliberations. Research question one asked if students come to a public speaking class viewing the world in polar terms and does the course have an impact on those views. Pre-/post- Tests revealed that students vacillate between dualistic and multiplistic thinking, moving from strongly-held beliefs about what is right and wrong to basing their decision-making processes on authorities or intuitive feelings about the goodness-of-fit for any expressed position. Research question two asked: Does students' understanding of civil public discourse theory and praxis increase over the duration of the class? Results suggest that students' understanding of civil public discourse does increase. Research question three asked: Does a speech-in-context course create a similar level of understanding of public presentation skills as a traditional skills-based public speaking course? Pre-test means and post-test means indicate that all students reported an increase in public speaking skills especially in their understanding of ethical public speaking (see Gayle, Martin, Mann, & Chrouser, 20002 for more details).

What remains to explore in this project is whether a student's own attitudes toward their adopted topic and the topics they listened to in class changed and in what direction. Additionally, an analysis of each student's progress (34 in two classes) in terms of learning transformations should produce a more holistic snapshot of student learning potential in this class. Pre and post attitude tests and attitude response exercises are currently being analyzed to address the first issue, while student journals are being analyzed to address the second issue.

After last semester's project, I learned that community depends not only on the degree to which we care about and treat each other with respect and civility, but that feelings of trust, solidarity, security and empathy are essential preconditions for free and full participation in discourse. So this semester, I have extended upon the idea of building commonality and common ground in my communicating prejudice course. In the past, I discovered that difficult dialogues about race, class, sexual orientation, gender differences, and age involve engaging students in incrementally deepening their understanding of ideas and actions (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Subjective reframing happens only in a safe climate where people feel free to speak the truth, where blaming and judging are minimal, and full participation and mutual understanding is encouraged (Mezirow, 2000). My goal this semester is to explore how can I can create a classroom where students can build safe spaces for dialogue that does not require them to give up their central beliefs, values, and commitments, but where the tension of dealing with differences in opinions can provide conversations that generate fresh insights and understandings.

Research suggests that making space for diverse viewpoints—views that challenge what may be the prevailing norms—requires feelings of security and empathy, a willingness to "try-on" others' point of view, a tolerance for the anxiety involved in synthesis and re-framing, and a provisional suspension of judgment to encourage reflective discourse (Bulach, Brown, & Potter, 1998; Goplan, 1997). My research questions for this current project are: How are safe spaces in the classroom created and the tension between critical and civil deliberations negotiated? and When during the transformation process is a supportive environment most important?

I am in the process of teaching the course now and it is going well (just as it always has), but I am viewing the process under a microscope and am much more intentional about the possibility of deep understanding instead of just learning and identifying transformations that make deep understanding possible. The first piece of data I collected was the class' deliberation results in creating communicative guidelines for building a safe environment in which to talk about difficult topics. I am collecting additional data through process reports where students discuss their beliefs, feelings and knowledge on a topic like racism at the beginning of our study and then report what they are thinking and feeling after we complete our class readings, exercises, videos, and discussions on that topic. Additionally, I am exploring the journal entries students write each week linking their readings to their own out-of-class experiences. I am also keeping my own teaching journal. I hope to analyze the data I am collecting in two ways. One is to explore the patterns reported that indicate students did feel safe to discuss difficult topics and express divergent views. The other analysis involves looking at each individual student's personal transformation, or lack of it, to identify whether re-framing or re-visioning was possible in the short span of one semester of a course covering prejudice and discrimination.

My personal explorations of the scholarship of teaching and learning—of using my own classroom as a place to conduct a scholarly investigations on student learning—has forever changed the way I teach and the way I participate in scholarly investigations. Being a selected as a Carnegie Scholar this past year has been a real gift. I have learned so much about teaching strategies and the philosophy of learning that I have only scratched the surface. I never realized how much literature there was on teaching in

higher education nor had I systematically integrated that literature into my teaching as I am trying to do now. Yet, it has been somewhat gratifying to identify places where my instincts were right as well as places where I will have a better chance to make my classroom practices more successful. The personal satisfaction I have gained from "talking" about teaching on a higher level with folks who care deeply about teaching and deep understanding can not be measured. The unexpected benefit is a much deeper understanding of the methodologies used to explore and investigate communicative behaviors in action. This understanding is likely to have implications for my scholarship of teaching and learning and my own research agenda outside of the classroom.

I am a convert. I believe that any professor can gain deep and lasting insights into her or his teaching by engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. So much so, I suspect that they will appear at conferences such as this to gather new converts that will increase the dialogue and illuminate best practices for teaching college students. I invite you to join me and reap the benefits of engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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